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THE MIRACLE PLAY IN ENGLAND

SOME RECORDS OF PRESENTATION, AND NOTES ON PRESERVED PLAYS

BY GEORGE R. COFFMAN

At the close of a recent paper, in which I made a critical inquiry as to the actual use of the term Miracle Play in England from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and in which I pointed out (1) that even records of popular usage do not justify the sweeping assertions of modern historians of the drama and (2) that the official records never employ the term Miracle Play in their references to cyclic plays or independent religious plays of any kind, I made the following statement:¹

"An examination of the records for references to Miracle Plays in England shows that they were presented in different parts of the country during the whole period from the thirteenth to the close of the sixteenth centuries.²

"In other words, during the time that these 'popular' references which we have considered were being made, actual Miracle Plays were being presented all over England. Hence we should expect to find mention of them."

The traditional attitude regarding the saints' plays presented in England during the later middle ages is well summarized in a footnote of a recent, revised edition of Pollard's *English Miracle Plays*:³

"The *Ludus de Sancta Katherina* at Dunstable, pageants on the subject of the lives of St. Fabyan, St. Sebastian, and St. Botulf, performed in London, plays at Windsor and Basingbourne on St. George, and the *Ludi Beatae Christinae*, at Bethersden, Kent, are the only Miracle Plays, in the scientific use of the term, of which I find mention of the performance in England, and none of these, unfortunately, now survive."

¹ *The Miracle Play in England—Nomenclature, Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. xxxi (1916), pp. 448-465.

² The *terminus ad quem* should have been approximately 1563, the period of final establishment of the power and influence of the Church of England, and that of the passing of the cult of saints.

³ Alfred W. Pollard, *English Miracle Plays, Moralities, and Interludes*, Oxford, 1914 (sixth edition, revised).

Mr. Baskervill, in the course of a masterly treatment of romantic plays in England,⁴ does suggest the point of view of students who are now making a careful and intensive study of the English drama, during this period. After naming a brief list of saints for whom we have records of plays, he says: "Such entries seem to me extremely significant as probably typical of many towns where from time to time saints plays or Miracles of the Virgin were given." But there is at present no such separate, classified list of saints' plays produced in England during this period.

In view of the foregoing facts, I propose in this brief paper to list an initial body of records of presentation of Miracle Plays in England, and to add some notes on Miracle Plays completely or partially preserved. That this list might be increased now or may be increased during the next few years by students who have wider access to original documents, I am very confident. The citation of sources below will indicate that I have had to rely largely on the appendices to volume two of Chambers,⁵ a valuable surface mine for this purpose. In these pages I shall not discuss the loss of manuscripts,⁶ a fact of tremendous importance in helping to

⁴ C. R. Baskervill, *Some Evidences for Early Romantic Plays in England*, *Modern Philology*, vol. xiv, p. 478.

⁵ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediæval Stage*, vol. I-II, Oxford, 1903. My point of view in this bit of research is indicated in Mr. Manly's summary of a lecture in which he had presented evidence as to the widespread loss of manuscripts of all kinds of religious plays during the English Reformation: "The absence of manuscripts of Miracle Plays is not at all surprising; and it is by no means to be interpreted that there were no Miracle Plays in England or that they died early. We have plenty of evidence that they were played from the twelfth to the sixteenth century."

⁶ The following well-known passage from Bale, referring to loss of manuscripts during the English Reformation (John Bale—*Preface to Reader to John Leland's Laborious Journey*, etc., ed. W. A. Copinger, 1895, pp. 18-19), is pertinent here: "Neuer had we bene offended for the losse of our lybraryes, beyng so many in nombre, and in so desolate places for the more parte, yf the chiefe monumentes and moste notable workes of our excellent wryters, had bene reserued. If there had bene in euery shyre of Englande, but one solemayne lybrary, to the preseruacyon of these noble workes, and preferment of good lernynges in oure posterite, it had bene yet sumwhat. But to destroye all without consyderacyon, is and wyll be vnto Englande for euer, a moste horryble infamy amonge the graue senyours of other nacyns. A greate nombre of them whych purchased

explain the comparative scarcity of records of saints' plays, which were dramas for special occasions and not preserved as carefully as Corpus Christi plays, which were often filed as official documents;⁷ I shall not discuss the widespread popularity of the cult of saints during this period, as evidenced in such aspects as saints'

those superstycyouse mansyons, reserued of those lybrarye boke, some to serue theyr iakes, some to scoure theyr candelstyckes, and some to rubbe their bootes. Some they solde to the grossers and sope sellers, and some they sent ouer see to the bokebynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full, to the wonderynge of the foren nacyons. Yea, the unyuersytees of thys realme, are not all clere in this detestable fact. But cursed is that bellye, whyche seketh to be fedde with suche vngodly gaynes, and so depelye shameth hys natural contreye. I knowe a merchaunt man, whych shall at thys tyme be namelesse, that boughte the contentes of two noble lybraryes for XI. shylynges pryce, a shame it is to be spoken. Thys stuffe hath he occupyed in the stede of graye paper by the space of more than these X. yeares, and yet he hath store ynough for as many yeares to come. A prodygyuose example is this, and to be abhorred of all men which loue their nacyon as they shoulde do." With this connect Mr. Copinger's comment (*ibid.*, pp. xx-xxi): "How little the MSS. of the religious houses were cared for may be gathered from the contemptuous way in which they were referred to in the accounts. 'Old books in the choir 6d.;' 'old books in the vestry sold to Robert Dorington 8d.;' 'old books and a cope in the library 2s.;' 'a flat chest with five books in it 8d.;' 'a mass book with its desk 8d.' These are samples of the sale of MSS. which would now be regarded as of immense value. Very few, indeed, are the service music books preserved; yet it has been estimated by a very good authority that at the time of the dissolution there must have been not less than a quarter of a million service books, such as antiphonals, gradualls, ordinalls, missalls, etc., in the various churches."

A survey of the records of presentation of plays compiled by Chambers, volume two, appendices, indicates a wholesale loss of all kinds of dramatic productions. Then, as to preserved documents of an earlier period, only a "fortunate accident," the fire which destroyed the borrowed copes, occasioned any record of the Dunstable St. Catherine play. The Hildesheim St. Nicholas plays are bound up in a manuscript containing medical prescriptions; and the Einsiedeln fragment of the St. Nicholas scholars' play is bound up as the fly leaf of another manuscript. And to mention another field of literature, only chance saved the *Beowulf* from the fire in 1731 which destroyed the Cottonian MSS.

⁷ A case in point here is that of the York plays. There is only one manuscript of this cycle. That even one is preserved is due to the fact that the city authorities had control of the plays, and that a copy had to be deposited with them.

legends,⁸ patron saints of gilds and other organizations as well as of churches and monasteries,⁹ and pilgrimages to saints' shrines,¹⁰ —all of which would tend to substantiate a theory as to the popularity of the cult which was the occasion of our type of drama; and, finally, I shall not discuss pageants on saints' days, saints' pageants in connection with Corpus Christi or other official processions, saints' ridings or mummings, or plays on saints' days in which the references are at all vague and uncertain.¹¹ These and related matters I hope to treat later in a more comprehensive paper.

Since the place and date of records of Miracle Plays are the important facts for our purpose, I shall list them first in order in the following compilation of data.

Bedfordshire, Dunstable c. 1119 St. Catherine.

"(Gaulfridus) legit igitur apud Dunestapliam
expectans scholam Sancti Albani sibi repromissam, ubi
quendam ludum de Sancta Katerina (quem miracula
vulgariter appellamus) fecit."¹²

Cambridgeshire, Bassingbourne July 20, 1511 St. George.

⁸ Mr. Gerould (G. H. Gerould, *Saints' Legends*, 1916, p. 305) at the close of a comprehensive chapter on Saints' Legends in England from the Conquest to the Reformation writes: "It will be evident, I think, that to men of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries legends were regarded not only as an important branch of literature, but as indispensable food for the intellect and emotion of all estates." He emphasizes the popularity of this type by pointing out that the total number of middle English saints' legends is considerably greater than the total number of romances.

⁹ Relative to patron saints of gilds, Toulmin Smith has the following footnote to the Gild of Smiths of Chesterfield (*English Gilds*, E. E. T. S., p. 168, note): "This Gild seems to have had no patron saint. Among the records of at least six hundred early English gilds that have come under my careful review I have rarely found this absence, save in some of the Gilds-Merchant."

¹⁰ Chapter three of Jusserand (*English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*), Pilgrims and Pilgrimages, forms an excellent beginning for such a study. It is significant that Chaucer's *magnum opus* has as its background such a pilgrimage.

¹¹ These constitute a much larger bulk of references than I am listing below.

¹² Matthew Paris, *Vitae Abbatum St. Albani* (London, 1684), p. 1007; Coffman, *A New Theory Concerning the Origin of the Miracle Play* (Banta, 1914), p. 5 and Chapter VI; Chambers II, 366.

"The Churchwarden's accounts of St. Michael's include the following:

'Anno 1523. A play of St. Swythyn, acted in the church on a Wednesday, for which was gathered 6:14:11½, etc.

'Anno 1525. There was a play at St. Andrew acted in the Church the Sunday before Relique Sunday; Rc^d, 8:9:6, etc.

'Anno 1534. A Play of Placidus alias St. Eustace, etc.¹⁸

Ireland, Dublin

1528

Crispin and Crispianus.

"Tho. Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the year 1528, was invited to a new play every day in Christmas. . . . wherein the taylors acted the part of Adam and Eve; the shoemakers represented the story of Crispin and Crispianus; the vintners acted Bacchus and his story; the Carpenters that of Joseph and Mary; Vulcan, and what related to him, was acted by the Smiths; and the comedy of Ceres, the goddess of corn, by the Bakers. Their stage was erected on Hoggin Green (now called College Green), and on it the priors of St. John of Jerusalem, of the blessed Trinity, and All Hallows caused two plays to be acted, the one representing the passion of our Saviour, and the other the several deaths which the apostles suffered."¹⁹

Kent, Bethersden

1522

St. Christina.

"The churchwardens' accounts record *ludi beatae Christinae*, in 1522. St. Christina's day was July 24."²⁰

Kent, Lydd

1455-6

St. George.

Records of Corporation of Lydd: 33, 34 Henry VI (1455-6).

"In expenses made the iiiith day of July being here Sir Thomas Keryell, the Luetenaunt of the Castell of Dover, and hir (their) wyvys, seeing the play of Seint George 18s. 6d."²¹

¹⁸ Chambers II, 342. See also Chambers II, 451: "From 1533-7 he (Nicholas Udall) was vicar of Braintree, Essex, and not improbably wrote the play of *Placidus alias Sir Eustace*, recorded in 1534 in the churchwardens' accounts."

¹⁹ Chambers, II, 365. See also Chambers, II, 365 footnote: "W. F. Dawson, *Christmas: its Origin and Associations*, 52, says that Henry II kept Christmas at Hogges in 1171 with 'miracle plays.' But I cannot find the authority for this." Ireland, because of its close relations with England, is included here.

²⁰ Chambers, II, 338. See also L. T. Smith, *York Plays*, lxxv.

²¹ Hist. Ms. Com. v, 521. See summary in Chambers, II, 383: "The town accounts show a play of St. George on July 4, 1456, and payment to the 'bane cryars' of 'our play' in 1468;" also Chambers, II, 386, under New Romney, Kent: "A second play of *St. George* was probably started in 1490 when a chaplain of the guild of St. George went to see the Lydd *St. George* play, with a view to reproducing it."

Lincoln, Lincoln	1441-1456	St. Lawrence, St. Susanna, Robert of Sicily, St. Clara, St. Jacob.
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"A set of local annals (1361-1515) compiled in the sixteenth century records the following plays:

1441-2.	Ludus Sancti Laurentii.
1447-8.	Ludus de Kyng Robert of Cesill.
1447-8.	Ludus Sanctae Susannae.
1452-3.	Ludus de Kyng Robert of Cesill.
1455-6.	Ludus de Sancta Clara.

"Cannon Rock, apparently quoting from the same document, also mentions a 'Ludus de Sancto Iacobo.'"²⁰

London	1393	St. Catherine.
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"In 1393, according to the *London Chronicle*, 'was the play of seynt Katerine.'"²¹

Norfolk, Lynn	1385-6	St. Thomas.
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Extracts from the Chamberlains accounts:

"iiiis iiijd paid by the Mayor's gift to persons playing the interlude of St. Thomas the Martyr."²²

Norfolk, Thatford Priory	1503-4	St. Mary Magdalene.
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"19 Henry VII (1503-4) Itm. sol. to the play of Mydelane, 12d."²³

Oxford, Oxford	1506	St. Mary Magdalene.
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"1506. To John Burgess, B. A., . . . xd were paid for writing out a miracle-play ('scriptura lusi') of St. Mary Magd., and vs. for some music; and viiij^d to a man who brought some songs from Edward Martyn, M. A.

²⁰ Chambers, II, 378. The following is the quotation from Rock to which Chambers refers (D. Rock, *The Church of Our Fathers*, II, 430): "In a parchment roll containing the names of mayors and bailiffs of Lincoln, beginning with the 34th of Edward III, among the other things worthy of record, notice is taken of 'Ludus de Pater Noster hoc anno; Ludus Sci Laurentii; Ludus See Susanne; Ludus de Sco Jacobo; Ludus Corpus Xpi.'" See also A. F. Leach, *Some English Plays and Players* in *An English Miscellany* (1901), pp. 222-230. Plays were given in Lincoln on St. Anne's day; but according to Leach these seem to have been of the Corpus Christi type.

²¹ Chambers, II, 380.

²² Hist. Mss. Com., XI, app. x, p. 223. See also, Chambers, II, 374.

²³ Chambers, II, 245.

The above extract was taken from the account books of Magdalen College, Oxford.²⁴

“The play of St. Obert, patron of the boxters or bakers, was at Perth yearly celebrated on the 10th of Dec. on a procession with torches by a band of musicians. One of the performers impersonated the devil, and all wore masquerade dress. A horse was led in the procession, with its hoofs enclosed in men’s shoes.”²⁸

“ 1516. In vino, pomis, et aliis novelis datis et expenditis super abbatem Salop et Famulos suos ad ludum et demonstrationem martiriorum Felicianae at Sabinæ in quaerera post muros.

John Bale's play:

Warwickshire, Coventry	1490, 1504-5	St. Catherine, St. Christian.
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1504-5. 'This yeaere they played the play of St. Crytyan in the little
arke.' ' 28

²⁰ Ch. Rogers, *Social Life in Scotland* (1884), II, 327. I am indebted to Mr. Hanly for this reference. He calls attention to a prohibition of 1574-5 which forbade certain plays, and suggests that probably this play fell under the prohibition.

²¹ Chambers, II, 447.

²⁰ Chambers, II, 362. See too for St. Christian, *The Coventry Leet Book* (E. E. T. S., 1913, No. 146, p. li, footnote). Also see *Notes and Queries* (Tenth Series, xi, 230): "'St. Christian,' Miracle Play. Was there ever a Miracle Play entitled St. Christian? Sharp (Coventry Mysteries, p. 10) quotes from a ms. list of Mayors, 'This yeaere (1505) they played the play of St. Crytyan in the Little Parke.' Hardin Craig ('Two Corpus Christi Plays') thinks St. Catherine was intended by this, as a play on this subject had been performed in 1490 or 1491 in the same place. I find however, in Inq. P. M. 19 Henry VIII, 46-55 (P. R. O.), that the play of 1505 is described as 'magnus ludus vocatus seynt Xpeans (Christians) play.'" M. D. Harris.

York 1455 St. Dionysius.

"In 1455 Robert Laingby 'clericus parochialis S. Dionisii Ebor.' leaves to the fabric of his parish church for his burial 'unam mappam de twill et ludum oreginale (sic) sancti Dionisii.' This play would be an important addition to the literature of the vestry, although the parishioners were in all probability well acquainted with its subject."²⁹

York 1554 St. George.

"For St. George's play in 1554 there were payments 'for vj yerdes of canvas and pagyant.'"³⁰

NOTES ON PRESERVED PLAYS

There are preserved from the period under consideration two—or possibly three—complete Miracle Plays in English, and one in Cornish. The first of these is the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*.³¹ It is a dramatization of the miraculous legend which relates how a Jew who attempted an outrage upon the consecrated host was converted. The following from Chambers (II, 427) gives the available information as to the date and location of the play: "The colophon (of the ms.) runs: 'Thus endyth the Play of the Blyssyd Sacrament, whyche myracle was done in the forest of Aragon, in the famous cite Eraclea, the yere of ower Lord God Mlcccc.lxi, to whom be honower. Amen.'" This account of the event on which the play is founded is confirmed by ll. 56-60 of the prologue. The date of composition cannot therefore be earlier than 1461, and probably is not much later. . . . The name Croxton is common to places in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, and other counties. Further identification may perhaps be helped by ll. 540-1—

²⁹ *Testamenta Eboracensia*, II, 117 (Surtees Society, 1855). I am indebted to Mr. Manly for this reference.

³⁰ L. T. Smith, *York Plays*, p. xxxv. See also xxxi: "There was also in York the universally-spread play of St. George, at Midsummer, with its procession; but nothing is known of the local text of this, which was almost surely a single short play." See further Chambers, II, 406. Though Chambers lists the notice as a riding, one of the items runs: "To the waites for rydyng and playing before St. George and the play."

³¹ For bibliographical note see Chambers, II, 427.

Editions: Whitley Stokes, in *Transactions of Philological Society*, 1860-1 (Appendix); Manly, *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearian Drama* (1897), I, 239. For the Legend with sources given see, *Hist. Litt. de la France*, XXI, 474-6.

'Inquyre to the Colkote, for there ys hys loggyng,
A lyttle besyde Babwelle Mylle.'"

The second Miracle Play preserved in English is Mary Magdalene of the Digby group. It is a dramatization of the "legendary life of Magdalen as it appears in the Golden Legend." It is of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Schmidt, who has made a careful study of the play (*Anglia*, VIII, 371), ascribes it to a west Midland author and a Kentish scribe; Furnivall, who edited the Digby plays, thinks the dialect East Midland.³² Relative to the type, as Mr. Manly has often pointed out in his class room, though the play contains a personification of the seven deadly sins, the technique is not that of the morality, it is not symbolistic, but realistic and direct. Thus, in the temptation scene, Mary becomes tired of staying at home and goes away to an inn—just as would happen today. A young man comes along and carries on a naturalistic seduction. It is our best example of a Miracle Play.

The third play in English to which I refer is the *Conversion of St. Paul*.³³

Schmidt assigns the play to an East Midland author and a Southern scribe. This drama stands as an individual play, not as a part of a cycle, and is the dramatization of the life of a saint. True, the events are based on the biblical narrative. But as Gerould puts it: ³⁴ "Though its materials are thus not apocryphal, it has all the ear-marks of legend in its treatment."³⁵ The Cornish Miracle

³² For bibliographical note see Chambers, II, 428 ff.

³³ For bibliographical note see Chambers, II, 429; edited by Manly, I, 215.

³⁴ G. H. Gerould, *Saints' Legends* (1916), p. 305.

³⁵ In this connection, I may call attention to a suggestion which I have made (*A New Theory Concerning the Origin of the Miracle Play*, Chapter V, p. 65) regarding the classification of the medieval Latin plays, the *Resurrection of Lazarus* and the *Conversion of St. Paul*: "I believe the evidence tends to show, not that these plays are logically connected with the Christmas and Easter dramatic offices, but that they are composed in honor of Lazarus and Paul as patron saints, and hence are Miracle Plays." The *Conversion of St. Paul*, standing as it does as an individual drama, I believe, should still be considered in the Digby group as a Miracle Play. But though the evidence suggests that the Lazarus play in its origin is in honor of a patron saint, I think it had lost this distinctive feature by the time of the developed Corpus Christi plays and had become an integral part of the great cycles.

For brief discussions of *Dux Moraud*, a fragment of a Latin play which may have been a *Miracle de Notre Dame* (printed in *Anglia*, xxx, 180 ff.),

Play to which I referred above is St. Meriasek or Meriadochus.³⁶ It was written in 1504; Mr. Stokes, the editor and translator of the play, suggests Camborne, Cornwall, of which place St. Meriasek was patron, as its locality.³⁷

University of Montana.

see Creizenach, *Geschichte des neueren Dramas* (1911), I, 159, and *Cambridge History of English Literature*, V. I, p. 45. It has been suggested too that the fragment, *Interludium de Clerico et de Puella* (see Chambers, II, 324) may be of the same type. I note this suggestion without comment.

³⁶ For bibliographical note, see Chambers, II, 435-6. Excellent summary of contents of play, *Cambridge Hist. Eng. Lit.*, V. I, pp. 16-17.

³⁷ I hope soon to present data concerning saints' pageants, and various miscellaneous references to plays on saints' days.